

INTRODUCTION

For four decades after World War Two, tiny Albania was hermetically sealed. The Stalinist dictator, Enver Hoxha, banned religion, private property, and “decadent” music such as the Beatles’. Secret police arrested critics and border guards shot people who tried to flee. But as communism crumbled across the Eastern Bloc, the regime loosened its grip. Pressed by demonstrations and poverty, in late 1990 the communists allowed other parties to exist. In early 1992, more than two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a democratically elected government came to power and started to bring Albania in from the cold.

Albania made a rapid switch. It transformed from a country with sealed borders to a smuggler’s dream, from the world’s only officially atheist state to a playground for religions, from a land with no private cars to a jumble of belching cars, buses, and trucks. Albania flipped from a country of harsh, top-down repression to a vibrant state where most anything goes.

This book describes that dramatic jump. It tells the inside story of Albania’s democratic awakening, the so-called revolution, when rigid Stalinism collapsed and wild pluralism stormed in. And it explains the effort since then to build a more just and tolerant society after decades of labor camps, thought police, and one-party rule.

The participants in this drama drive the tale: a paranoid dictator, an ambitious doctor, a scheming economist, an urban artist. Over two decades, I interviewed most of the influential Albanians in the country’s political life and many of the foreigners who played a role. They describe the first student protests, the last Politburo meetings, and the struggle to build democracy after dictatorship. To supplement their accounts, I cite articles from the Albanian press and previously secret records from Albania and the United States, mostly from the State Department and CIA.

I also enjoyed a front-row seat. I first went to Albania in 1993 and worked there for one year at a media training center, watching the wobbly first steps of democracy. I then covered the country for Human

Rights Watch and saw the resilience of one-party rule, the pull of dictatorship, and in 1997 the crash of massive pyramid schemes, when defrauded people torched city halls and looted military depots. The next year, war erupted in neighboring Kosovo, culminating in NATO's air assault on Serbian and Yugoslav forces. Albania offered a staging ground and supply route for the ragtag Albanian insurgency, and later a grave site for its victims. After 2001, I observed mostly Muslim Albania serve as a devoted ally of the United States. The government detained and helped render terrorist suspects, accepted released Guantanamo prisoners, and sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. Albania is probably the only country outside the United States with a statue of George W. Bush.

During this time, I watched the United States and other Western democracies repeatedly make shortsighted decisions that stymied Albania's transition. For many years, the U.S. and West European governments supported an authoritarian or corrupt Albanian leader for the sake of stability in the Balkans and, later, Albania's cooperation in the "war on terror." These governments frequently backed an individual more than the country's institutions; for this, Albania is today paying a significant price.

Through it all, I had the opportunity to mingle with Albania's elite. I watched former political prisoners join the government and government ministers go to jail. I saw foreigners who loved Albania get declared *persona non grata* while swindlers won business contracts and the highest state praise. I have been called a Communist, a CIA agent, pro-Albanian, anti-Albanian, pro-Greek, anti-Greek, pro-Serb, anti-Serb, and by one journalist, "a whimsical boy with an earring and short pants." But above all, I have been privileged to peer behind the curtain of a society that is for many outsiders opaque.

The book has limitations. First, it focuses on the capital, Tirana, and the boulevard that forms its spine. Second, it deals primarily with men, who dominate Albania's public life. Third, it mostly explores Albania's relationship with the United States, with less attention on other countries. With these in mind, I hope the book helps dispel myths, spark debate, and shed light on a tiny country in Europe going through a remarkable time.

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